



NEWS FROM NOAA

NATIONAL OCEANIC & ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION • US DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

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NOAA TO CONDUCT EMERGENCY RESPONSE DRILL IN FLORIDA KEYS NATIONAL MARINE SANCTUARY

Exercise will Enhance Ability to Protect the Environment and the Public

NOAA, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, will conduct an emergency response drill in the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary April 19-21, 2005, and is asking for assistance from local residents to help ensure its success. The goal of the drill is to improve the agency's ability to protect the environment of the Florida Keys and the public in case of a major incident. NOAA is an agency of the U.S. Department of Commerce.

The scenario for NOAA's first "Safe Sanctuaries" drill involves the hypothetical grounding of the M/V *Portsmith Trader*, an 800-foot cargo vessel carrying 270,000 gallons of fuel, at Elbow Reef off Key Largo. In the scenario, the grounding injures coral reef habitat and submerged historical artifacts, and an oil spill threatens other resources. The drill will involve actual field operations in the Key Largo area, with a series of buoys standing in for the grounded vessel. The Monroe County Emergency Operations Center in Marathon will serve as the command post for the exercise.

"The Safe Sanctuaries drill will enhance NOAA's ability to work with the U.S. Coast Guard and other partners to protect natural and cultural resources in a national marine sanctuary in the case of a major grounding or hazardous material spill," said Timothy R.E. Keeney, deputy assistant secretary of commerce for oceans and atmosphere. "While the protection of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary has reduced the threat of large vessel groundings, we must make sure NOAA is prepared to respond if a major incident occurs."

The Safe Sanctuaries drill will test the capabilities of several NOAA programs and include participation from the Coast Guard, which would be the lead agency in the event of an actual incident. The Florida Department of Environmental Protection will also participate in the exercise.

On-the-water activities associated with the drill will take place Wednesday, April 20 and Thursday, April 21. Due to safety concerns relating to the amount of boat traffic, the sanctuary is asking boaters to avoid Elbow Reef on those days. Boaters in the area may hear simulated emergency communications over VHF Channel 16 and NOAA All Hazards Radio (NOAA Weather Radio). This radio traffic will be prefaced by the statement, "this is a drill."

To simulate an oil spill, NOAA will release hundreds of orange and yellow “drift cards” designed to float on the surface, responding to wind and current. The public is asked to watch for cards that may wash up on shore. Each card contains written instructions, in English and Spanish, for reporting when and where it was found. By tracking the cards’ movement, NOAA will learn more about where hazardous materials might travel in the event of a spill. The small wooden cards are nontoxic and will biodegrade within a few months if not found. Information on where drift cards from the drill are found will be available at <http://response.restoration.noaa.gov/driftFL.html>.

“In the Florida Keys, the health of the marine environment and the local economy are linked,” said Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary Superintendent Billy D. Causey. “The lessons we learn from our simulated emergency response in the Safe Sanctuaries drill will allow NOAA to improve our ability to protect the coral reef ecosystem, the cornerstone of the Keys economy, in case of a real incident.”

Designated in 1990, Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary protects 2,900 square nautical miles of coral reefs, seagrass meadows, hardbottom communities, mangrove shorelines and mud and sand habitat. NOAA’s National Marine Sanctuary Program and the state of Florida jointly manage the sanctuary.

The NMSP seeks to increase the public awareness of America’s maritime heritage by conducting scientific research, monitoring, exploration and educational programs. Today, the NOAA sanctuary program manages 13 national marine sanctuaries and one coral reef ecosystem reserve that encompass more than 150,000 square miles of America’s ocean and Great Lakes natural and cultural resources.

The NOAA Ocean Service manages the NMSP, and is dedicated to exploring, understanding, conserving and restoring the nation’s coasts and oceans. NOS balances environmental protection with economic prosperity in fulfilling its mission of promoting safe navigation, supporting coastal communities, sustaining coastal habitats, and mitigating coastal hazards.

NOAA is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through the prediction and research of weather and climate-related events and providing environmental stewardship of our nation’s coastal and marine resources.

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On the Web:

NOAA: <http://www.noaa.gov>

NOAA Ocean Service: <http://www.nos.noaa.gov>

NOAA National Marine Sanctuary Program: <http://www.sanctuaries.noaa.gov>

Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary: <http://floridakeys.noaa.gov>

Real time details of the drill: <http://www.incidentnews.gov>